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Time for a Hard Look at a Big Secret

The resignation of Allen Dulles as head of the Central Intelligence Agency was hardly unexpected. His agency, and its director, had been under some criticism for the Pirates of Penzance act the CIA staged in the Bay of Pigs last April. And there are those, of the tea party school of international intrigue, who are still critical of our sending a U-2 over Russian territory. Mr. Dulles was the natural fall guy. His successor, John A. McCone, is of quite a different stripe. Mr. Dulles had, himself, had wide experience as a master spy. Mr. McCone's background, at least as announced to the public, has been that of businessman and hands-above-the-table government official.

Now that the command of CIA is changing, we may expect new pressures for a revamping of the agency. At the time of the Cuban disaster, it was pointed out that CIA should not be both an intelligence gathering agency and an operating agency. The British, older hands at the intelligence business, separate the two functions. An intelligence agency reports what it knows. If action is taken on this information, it is taken by another agency. This permits a questioning, a doubting, a caution. If the information is gathered by the agency that must act upon it, the danger is always present that some official will not hesitate sufficiently to believe himself. Disaster, as in Cuba, follows too easily.

Depending upon how you look at it, intelligence can be an heroic or a dirty business. If the intelligence agent is Nathan Hale (or Allen Dulles), it is heroic, necessary and in the highest tradition of patriotism. If the agent is a German submariner ashore on Long Island or a Russian sympathizer in an antique shop near a defense plant, it is a dirty, ugly business. It is especially

dirty when the agent is caught. And it is sometimes considered dirtiest of all when the agent is operating not in times of total war but in times of uneasy peace. It is shocking when the agent turns out to be one of our own, perhaps a Francis Powers flying a U-2.

Yet these adventures are necessary in a restless peace. They do it. We do it. Everybody does it. Our problem is made more difficult because we can't quite accept, in a free country, a government agency that is not accountable, even to Congress, for its activities. We do not know the names of the employees, their salaries or how much money they spend. It is one of the few, perhaps the only, agency in government that gets a blank check and that doesn't have to say what it used the money for. This whole approach is foreign to many Americans, including Sen. William Fulbright who spoke of the "moral problem" of tearing a leaf from the totalitarian book.

If we are going to have a secret intelligence agency, and nobody seriously suggests we can do without one, then we ought to have a good one. The Cuban adventure suggests that we re-examine the one we have. Is it true, as Stewart Alsop and others have charged, that CIA officials are so emotionally involved in their own intelligence reports that they can't view them with the "cold and fishy eye" of a separate agency? Don't we need nay-sayers, doubters who will ask appropriate questions? It's one thing to doubt a rival government bureau, quite another to doubt one's boss.

Now, with a new man going in at the top, is the time for a critical re-examination of CIA — if, indeed, we can examine it secretly enough to protect both its mission and the national interest.